

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



A Rare and Unusual Royal Silver Gift Commissioned by Pakubuwono X (r. 1893-1939), the 10th Susuhunan of Surakarta

Circa: circa 1910-1925

Probably Solo, Indonesia, circa 1910-1925

21cm high, 43cm long, 16cm wide

Diameter of containers from left to right: 10cm, 11.5cm, 8.8cm

Provenance: Private Collection

These three silver cylindrical containers of varying sizes are attached on top of a silver tray with a silver rectangular handle. The silver tray rests on six lobed feet with leafy floral decoration, the ends of the feet curve slightly inwards. The tray is decorated with carved foliage with blue enamel on top of the silver chasing. The three silver containers and the handle are also finely decorated with carved, elaborate floral scrollwork embellished with blue enamel which further highlights the carved birds, peacocks, foliage and lobed motifs, the latter possibly depicting stylised lotus flowers. The front and back of each container together with each side of the handle bear the carved bold initials 'PB X' enameled in blue; these initials are surmounted by a crown. The central container consists of the coat of arms of Surakarta which includes a six-pointed star to the right of the crown and a crescent moon and sun radiant to the left of the crown. The lower edges of the tray, the handle and the rims of the containers all have beaded decoration. The intricate decoration on all three pieces refers strongly to their royal connection: peacocks symbolize power and royalty, and they are depicted here either on their own or in pairs with their tails fully fanned out, the feathers decorated with deep blue enamel, or resting with tails closed. The skilled execution of the entire piece is evident on the balanced depiction of the different types of vegetation, amongst which the magnificent peacocks and striking lotus-motifs are placed.

This rare and unusual piece was most likely made in Solo or its surrounding area, commissioned by the tenth Susuhunan of Surakarta, Pakubuwono X (b. 1866-1939), who reigned Surakarta from 1893-1939.

Although the original function of these silver containers is unknown, we do know from the 'PBX' royal cypher and the royal Makuta of Solo that this item was commissioned by Pakubuwono X himself, most probably to be given as a royal gift. Pakubuwono X had commissioned numerous royal gifts for the

Dutch and other guests, for example he commissioned and copied into gold, gifts for the royal wedding (1901) of Queen Wilhelmina and Prince Hendrik which included a betel set, handkerchief box, tobacco jar, sweetmeat dish and a water pot amongst various other gifts (see Wassing-Visser, pp. 150-56). Although we are unsure of the purpose of these royal silver containers, one possibility is that they were used as containers for cigars and cigarettes. Perhaps the central container - being the shortest and widest – was used to offer either matches or pinang (nuts).

Over his 46 years of rule over Surakarta, Pakubuwono X faced many political vicissitudes alongside the undertakings by the Dutch East Indies. Despite this, the reign under Pakubuwono X, is known as one of the most prosperous times for Surakarta, as it grew to become the fifth largest city in the Dutch East Indies. A silver box with decorative motifs strongly resembling those found in the Hindu Prambanan temple complex, now in the Van Gesseler Verschuur Collection (see Kal, p. 108, fig. 5), circa 1930-1932, shares similar stylised lobed, lotus-like decoration as seen on our three containers. The decorative elements on our piece show the rich cultural heritage of Indonesia, evolved over the centuries.

Literature:

Kal, Pienke, W.H. *Yogya Silver: Renewal of a Javanese Handicraft*, Tropenmuseum, KIT Publishers, Amsterdam, 2005.

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Wassing-Visser, R. *Royal Gifts from Indonesia: Historical Bonds with the House of Orange-Nassau (1600-1938)*, Waanders Publishers, Zwolle, 1995.